Gideon Jacobs: Virtual Photography and Evidence

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 11–13; use December 15 and 18.
“Point of View,” Artforum (February 8, 2021).

Before reading:

Read the companion below after Sontag. It supplies the argument and a way to question it without requiring a private reading account. The publisher’s full essay is optional further reading and may require a subscription.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Reading companion:

Companion to the Getty/Gran Turismo example, Kent Sheely discussion and concluding definition problem. The only quotation below is Szarkowski’s sentence as quoted by Jacobs. All other explanatory paragraphs are authored course commentary, not an abridged text by Jacobs.

Authored course commentary, prepared with Codex.
The single quoted sentence is attributed above.

Jacobs’s 2021 essay asks what counts as photography when the scene has been made by software. He begins with a concrete institutional example: Getty Images appointing photographers to make images inside Gran Turismo. In his account, the resulting images enter a professional licensing system. His point concerns a change in what the industry recognizes as a photograph. The example does not settle whether a simulated race supplies the same kind of evidence as a race recorded by a camera.

The essay then moves from a business decision to artists who select images inside games. One of his examples is Kent Sheely’s practice of acting as a journalist within Day of Defeat: Source. An imagined environment supplies a place in which someone chooses a position and a moment. Selection can be consequential even when no physical battle stood before a lens. Yet calling that activity journalism raises another question: what event is being documented, and what claim could a viewer reasonably make from the image?

Jacobs sets two definitions against one another. A technical definition connects photography with recording light. A screenshot records a displayed or

rendered image through software. A second definition emphasizes choosing a view. In that account, the act of selecting and framing could connect camera photography with work made inside a virtual environment. These definitions value different features of the practice. Choosing one changes what belongs in the category.

Read this short passage from the closing discussion:

Source quotation

“One might compare the art of photography to the act of pointing.”

Reading the distinction

Jacobs attributes this sentence to John Szarkowski. In this handout it is quoted from Jacobs’s essay, not from a separately inspected Szarkowski edition.

Use Sontag to test what this definition achieves. Selecting a view explains how both a camera photograph and a game image can be interpretations. It does not establish that both record a physical event. A clearly identified screenshot might support a claim about the appearance of a game environment or the choices of its player. It would need different evidence to support a claim that the depicted physical battle actually occurred. Category and evidential use are related questions, but answering one does not answer the other.

An objection is that concentrating on physical events makes virtual activity seem inconsequential. A game tournament, a conversation or an artistic decision can matter to people even if its setting is simulated. This objection gives a reason to distinguish the reality of the activity from the status of the depicted scene. It does not require treating the two as interchangeable. Test Jacobs’s argument by naming the precise activity and the precise claim at issue.

His closing predictions about the importance of virtual imagery belong to 2021. Treat them as predictions to assess, not as verified descriptions of 2026. For the essay, a useful move is to compare a camera image and a clearly labeled screenshot, then state what each lets a viewer know and what each leaves unresolved. You can agree with his broader category of photography while qualifying what an image proves. You can also defend a

narrower category while recognizing the visual decisions involved in making a screenshot.

Vocabulary:

- **Screenshot:** An image captured from what a screen displays or software renders.
- **Referent:** The person, thing or event an image refers to.
- **Simulation:** A constructed model or environment.
- **Curatorial:** Involving selection and arrangement.
- **Ontology:** A question about what kind of thing something is. You can ask the question in plain language.

Discuss:

- What does Getty's decision establish in Jacobs's argument, and what does it leave undecided?
- Can "pointing" define a visual practice without guaranteeing that its scene happened physically?
- Put one claim from Sontag and one from this companion into conversation. Identify what would make them disagree or answer different questions.

Connection:

Use the December 15 photographic-evidence study and December 18 discussion to refine the distinction between a compelling image, a photographic practice and support for a specific factual claim.

Full source / further reading.

This extends the meaning-and-evidence distinction without settling the category of photography for every purpose.

Printable handout:

Download the supported reading PDF.